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# Will congressional staffers join the Great Resignation?

Low pay and long hours have always been the price of working in the Capitol. But after two pandemic years, threats of violence, and bitter partisan gridlock, some staffers are reaching their breaking points.



Congressional staffers outside the Senate chamber on March 5, 2021 (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

## Mini Racker

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**T**urnover has always been high in Congress, where low wages and long hours in the Capitol can transform bright-eyed young people into burnt-out ex-staffers within a few years. Right now, other factors are at play as well; since President Biden came to Washington, the executive branch has plucked its aides from the halls of Congress, as new administrations tend to do. Meanwhile, campaigns are staffing up for the midterms.

But in some ways, Congress is a workplace like any other, and the dissatisfaction afflicting other Americans hasn't left the Capitol untouched, as staffers see workers in other industries leave their jobs or demand better benefits and wages.

In 2021, Americans began quitting their jobs at a record pace. Dubbed the [“Great Resignation,”](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/great-resignation-60-minutes-2022-01-10/) experts linked the phenomenon to a variety of causes, including better job prospects, concerns about getting COVID-19, new perspectives on the role of work, and burnout. And while the prestige of working on the Hill insulates it from some of these trends, the Capitol isn't entirely immune.

Hard numbers on staff turnover in Congress are not readily available, although the House Office of Diversity and Inclusion's Compensation and Diversity Study, which was conducted in [2019](https://www.house.gov/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/2019_house_compdiversitystudy_executivesummary.pdf),

[https://www.house.gov/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/2019\\_house\\_compdiversitystudy\\_executivesummary.pdf](https://www.house.gov/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/2019_house_compdiversitystudy_executivesummary.pdf)) and again [in July](https://diversity.house.gov/compensation-benefits), indicates that staffers may actually have become more attached to their jobs in that

timeframe. The share of respondents who indicated they were considering looking for employment elsewhere dropped from 44.7 percent in 2019 to 42.2 percent in 2021.

The surveys also indicated, however, that the share of staffers who were satisfied with their benefits dropped between 2019 and 2021. While the share of staffers satisfied with their pay rose slightly, it remained low, at 38.6 percent.

A committee staff assistant who is looking to quit was among the many who pointed to a low salary as one of the most significant factors making Congress a less attractive place to work.

“I have, like, seven roommates,” the staff assistant said. “We have ... not the nicest place—mice, some roaches, and the heat’s not always great. But I generally count myself lucky to be here.

“If you're going to hire someone and offer them \$35,000 a year, you might as well just be saying, ‘We only hire rich kids’ or ‘Regular people, do not apply’”.

An [analysis](https://issueone.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Fair-Pay-Why-Congress-Needs-to-Invest-in-Junior-Staff.pdf) (https://issueone.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Fair-Pay-Why-Congress-Needs-to-Invest-in-Junior-Staff.pdf) released last week by bipartisan political-reform organization Issue One found that one in eight congressional staffers did not make a living wage in 2020. Even the strategies they once used to get by have been closed off.

“For years, people have talked about being able to attend different receptions in order to get free food or try to make a paycheck go as far as it can,” said Issue One Research Director Michael Beckel.

Since the pandemic, staffers can’t count on free meals any more. Some have been forced to go into the office at times when they’ve felt it was unsafe to do so because of the virus; others have been stuck working at home in rooms too small to hold a desk.

“I knew a lot of people who moved back home,” said a junior committee staffer. “They were like, ‘I want to go back home to my family. I'm not making enough money; I just want to figure things out. This is just changing my entire perspective.’ ... They're like, ‘I don't want to settle for less. I want more out of my job.’”

Unfortunately for many congressional staffers, their jobs want more out of them. Courtney Laudick, one of the cofounders of the Congressional Progressive Staff Association, recalled the pressures of working in Congress at the beginning of the pandemic.

“We were just getting calls from everyone,” Laudick said. “‘We can't find masks. There's no PPE in this hospital.’ As a government office, we were trying to respond to that. So on top of just the usual pressures on the Hill, there was more work to do ... but there wasn't more pay. There wasn't more time off.”

The canceled recesses that often keep members in town also mean canceled vacations for congressional staffers and work for months on end with little reprieve.

“The demands that have been placed on congressional staff in the last two years, especially casework staff, has been greater than at any time I've witnessed in Capitol Hill,” said Bradford Fitch, the president and CEO of the Congressional Management Foundation. “There used to be a time when Congress would recess before the election and they wouldn't come back until the Tuesday after Martin Luther King's birthday. ... So this constant strain with no break has been an incredible driver of people considering new jobs.”

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A survey that CPSA conducted last month of 516 congressional staffers, almost all Democrats, found that nearly half said they were struggling to make ends meet, while more than half said they were working at least 50 hours per week; 85 percent said they believed Congress is a toxic work environment.

The problems are heightened for staffers of color, many of whom say the [concerns they raised after Jan. 6](https://www.nationaljournal.com/s/712218/for-staffers-of-color-response-to-riot-fits-into-larger-pattern-of-racial-tensions/?unlock=K8XXTAW6PR2Bo1JM) have gone largely unaddressed by white leaders. They say the intersecting traumas of microaggressions at work, racist violence in the news, and the disparate impact of COVID-19 has left them feeling exhausted or tokenized—but also just done.

“A lot of the movement of accountability is linked to Gen Z or millennial staffers of color that are finally fed up with the status quo with COVID and everything,” said the junior committee staffer. “And as everybody learns more about how people go through these things, people are suddenly starting to open their eyes and realize it's not acceptable.”

The realities of a job in Congress have a long history of grinding down staffers' idealism, but those feelings have grown more acute since Jan. 6. One former senior Democratic staffer who views their departure as part of the Great Resignation traced that decision to polarization and the aftermath of the insurrection. The past year or so, the former staffer said, had disabused them of the notion that Congress was a place where the two parties could come together to work through the issues. Not only was the legislative agenda slow-moving, the former staffer said, working with GOP staffers was increasingly frustrating—for instance, the experience of waiting in line for a COVID-19 vaccine with employees of GOP lawmakers who were downplaying the virus and discrediting the shot.

That moment made the staffer think it was really time to reconsider working on the Hill.

“I wanted to make it work as long as I could,” the former staffer said. “And I think ultimately, it was just this confluence of factors where I was like, ‘I can't be this stressed out every day. I can't be this upset every time I leave work.’”

That staffer left for the campaign world—a work environment hardly known for its relaxed pace—but a setting in which they thought they would see more results and worry less about sharing an elevator with mask-less colleagues.



Many of the former staffer's old colleagues appear to be part of the Great Resignation, too. Almost all of the people who worked in the same congressional office last year are no longer working there. The former staffer and several other congressional employees also told *National Journal* that they noticed a steady stream of goodbye emails and job postings on email listservs in 2021 that surpassed what they saw before the pandemic.

"I'll give you ... an anecdote that I got from a hiring manager in the Senate that is quite telling," Fitch said. "She said normally she gets a flood of unsolicited résumés for people looking for jobs in the Senate. And she said recently the flood has turned into a trickle."

But despite numerous vacancies, the jobs remain competitive, and even low-level roles can still draw nearly 100 applicants. Adding to the pressure these current staffers feel already is the sense that there will always be someone willing to take their place, a feeling which makes them hesitant to take time off, let alone demand better pay and working conditions. The constant turnover itself makes organizing even harder, and many individual staffers feel Congress's issues are deeply entrenched. Still, advocates are fighting to win reforms, in part by warning that the status quo is and will keep leading Congress to miss out on the best, most diverse employees.

"Before the pandemic, we were telling congressional offices, 'You need to consider adopting work-flex policies in your office,'" Fitch said. "Now we're saying, 'It's not a choice. You're not going to lose that talented employee to K Street; you're going to lose them to the Longworth Building.' ... You have to adopt modern workplace policies."